

Thailand



Peter Maguire and Mike Ritter, *Thai Stick: Surfers, Scammers, and the Untold Story of the Marijuana Trade*

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THAI STICK ADDRESSES a particular history of influences between the West and South Asia; namely, the illegal marijuana trade between Thailand and the United States during the Vietnam War and the countercultural movements in 1960s and 1970s America. The ideological fundamentals of the relatively short hippie era and its tremendous impact on Western, as well as Asian and other cultures, are part and parcel of today's international youth travelers' ideology (WESTERHAUSEN 2002), dance, and spiritual subcultures (D'ANDREA 2007), as well as different affective groups (BOUSIOU 2008). However, hippie history *per se* has not yet been studied comprehensively from an ethnographic perspective, but has rather been described in various firsthand accounts (MACLEAN 2007; SCHOU 2010), and depicted in Hollywood movies and documentaries.

The Maguire/Ritter book is an account of a particular group of Californian surfer-smugglers, who from the 1960s and well into the 1980s supplied the U.S. drug market with prime quality cannabis product, “the Cuban cigar of the marijuana world” (54), the Thai stick. The book is the result of a collaboration between historian Peter Maguire and an ex-surfer/smuggler, Mike Ritter. As a professional historian and former researcher of Khmer Rouge atrocities, Maguire saw in the book the opportunity to “capture a forgotten dimension of an era that would otherwise go unrecorded and undocumented” (xxxii), while Ritter wanted to understand the historical forces that moved him to traffic cannabis. The book is actually written by Maguire, while Ritter conducted most of the interviews. In almost two decades of intermittent research, thousands of hours of interviews were collected with “smugglers, Thai pot growers, law enforcement agents, Vietnam-era intelligence professionals, smugglers turned confidential informants, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and even some of Southeast Asia's regional power brokers” (xi).

The numerous surfing, traveling, and smuggling stories, as well as descriptions of the smugglers' characters and careers are narrated in documentary style and organized into eleven chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. However, the scope

of the account is wider, with numerous excursions to social, political, and historical contexts of the places and countries where the individual smuggling undertakings were carried out enrich the otherwise dense and sometimes confused chapters.

As part of America's "love generation" of the 1960s and 1970s, Californian surfers or "watermen" are introductorily presented as different from gangsters: while the latter were violent, dangerous, and organized hierarchically, the surfers were closer to hippies and were—also in the later role of smugglers—driven by their own moral code of camaraderie, which kept them and their surfer cohorts away from cocaine and opiates. Their dreams were to live the surfing life; ride the best waves in the world, and smoke good quality cannabis. Apart from their local Californian beaches and the surf spots of neighboring Mexico, their dream destinations were northern France in the fall, and Hawaii, Tahiti, South Africa, Mauritius, Bali, and Java in the winter and summer. And last but not least, within the counterculture's ideological streams, surfing was often considered to be a kind of meditation, an example of absolute freedom that allows for living totally in the present.

The surfer-smuggler protagonists of the book established "an aquatic version of the Hippie Trail" (3) in the late 1960s. Although their smuggling activities also overlapped with the ordinary "hash route," which led from Istanbul to Afghanistan, India, Nepal and—in its later stages—to Southeast Asia and Bali, these surfers were not like hippie drifters. They specialized in international smuggling through aircraft and across the seas in ever more inventive ways (for example, 200, note 13) and sold cannabis to local dealers.

An important context of the enterprise was the Vietnam War, that changed the circumstances in Southeast Asia tremendously, and also paved the way for big pot-growing farms in northeastern Thailand's provinces of Isan, especially the province of Nakhon Phanom near the Laotian border. The U.S. military built an infrastructure of military bases and roads that connected Bangkok to the rest of the nation. For tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers in these bases, local marijuana became the most wanted commodity (65–67). These business relations between Thai pot growers, smugglers, brokers, and U.S. soldiers also invented the "Thai stick" as a way of packing marijuana—a set of about five seedless marijuana buds tied together on a bamboo stick.

As almost half of the U.S. troops were pot smokers, it is hardly possible to think about marijuana use in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s without its reference to Vietnam (196, note 20). As the U.S. military and Nixon's administration reacted harshly to the problem, the soldiers began smoking heroin instead. Contrary to cannabis, which was seen rather as harmless domestic medicine, heroin also represented a big problem to Thai law enforcement. The focus on heroin prosecution importantly opened up new opportunities for Thai pot growers, brokers, and traders as well as international smugglers and their partners/dealers in American cities.

The massive marijuana trade developed independently from the trade in other drugs. First, heroin and cocaine were taboo drugs to surfers, and hierarchically organized gangs controlled the trade. Second, law enforcement and the "war on drugs" declared by Richard Nixon in 1969 focused much more on heroin and cocaine, while cannabis was of less importance for the agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA, founded in 1973). Third, marijuana smuggling was

unorganized, improvisatory, and based on mutual trust, respect, and camaraderie of the surfers, watermen, Vietnam veterans, and Thai local “fixers” or middlemen who provided the Thai sticks from the farmers in northeast Thailand. Fourth, Thai marijuana trading was more lucrative than the authorities thought (that is, a ton that cost \$50,000 in Thailand was resold for \$3 million in the U. S. [141–42]).

In the second half of the book the series of smuggling stories are further highlighted. However carefully prepared, in practice the “scams” of Thai sticks and other cannabis products were often wildly unpredictable. There was constant movement from the fishing town of Pattaya, which “was forever transformed during the 1960s when it became an R&R destination for American soldiers” (71) to Morocco, Durban in South Africa, New Zealand, back to Bali’s Kuta Beach on a surfing break, then to Australia, and so on. The local Thai brokers put together loads, bribed the police, politicians, or the military if they intervened, loaded tons of grass on Thai fishing boats, transported it to the mother ships, which had usually been previously bought and arranged in Singapore, and—hoping not to be caught by pirates, Khmer Rouge patrol boats, or the Vietnamese Navy—sailed across the Pacific, offloaded on Californian beaches, transported everything to safe houses, and finally sold the smuggled goods to anxious Americans.

Things started to change when great profits from the tons of marijuana sold in U.S. cities attracted the attention of DEA agents on one hand and the Mafia on the other; the circle of old, trustworthy smuggler friends was getting smaller and smaller as “the 1960s hippie scammer ethos had been replaced by a cocaine-fuelled ‘he who has the most wins’ philosophy” (107). Some stayed true to the old hippie style and did small high-quality deals, but others moved into commercial shipping and had “to associate with criminals who could ensure safe passage into harbors and private docks” (131).

The numerous stories often blur the book’s structure. However, the index is of great help for readers who wish to find individual places and subjects of interest. The big picture changes as the focus of the book, especially in its second half, is narrowed down to a series of individual scams and the changes that were brought to the smuggling of marijuana with growing quantities and profits, such as the entrance of criminal structures into the trade, the normalization of cocaine use by some of the smuggling groups, and the new technology used by DEA agents and other law enforcement institutions. With the help of confidential informants, the American authorities finally succeeded in shutting down the trade by the end of the 1980s. One by one, the smugglers were arrested and sentenced up to ten years in prison. Mike Ritter, who retired from smuggling in 1986, was brought to trial as late as 2003, when he was already working on the book. He was sentenced to two years in prison, and served a year and six months. On his release he continued with the research for the book.

To a certain extent, the book can be seen as more of homage to marijuana smugglers than a fully contextualized study. Even though the book is organized in an academic manner with a rich bibliography and extensive endnotes, the chapter headings often do not correspond to the actual contents that follow. Moreover, although the cultural and political circumstances that allowed the smuggling of cannabis products to happen to such an extent are certainly acknowledged, it seems that the Asian context is much less represented than the American one. Despite

the good intentions that the authors undoubtedly had with the book, especially when raising the issue of the politics of marijuana in the U.S. during its forty-year “war on drugs,” the big picture of the account is used simply to provide historic authenticity to the smuggling stories, rather than for a comprehensive study of the trade’s contexts, especially those involved on the Asian side. *Thai Stick* is certainly an exciting and interesting book. It is a pioneering work, full of unbelievable stories and admirable details about the trade. However, its lack of a central thesis and theoretical conclusions makes it less relevant for academic use.

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